

‘Unlock Paradise with your own Blood’:

Martyrdom and Salvation in Islam and Christianity

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There was none other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in.

(Cecil F. Alexander ‘There is a Green Hill far away’, 1847)

If you have to lay down your life for God...it is not in gentle fevers and on soft beds, but in the sharp pains of martyrdom. You must take up the cross and bear it after your Master, as he himself instructed you. The sole key to unlock Paradise is your own life’s blood. (Tertullian, *On the Soul*, 55)

Martyrdom and Salvation in Islam

Arguably, the twenty-first century so far has been significantly shaped by the actions of fewer than twenty men, who on the morning of 11th September 2001 hijacked four planes, and flew two of them into the ‘Twin Towers’ of the World Trade Center, New York. As iconic as it was deadly, more than 3000 people, including the 19 hijackers, were killed on the day now known simply as 9/11. The attack led to the then U.S. President George W. Bush to declare a ‘War on Terror,’ leading to subsequent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. That he also called this response as a ‘Crusade’¹ fuelled the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ narrative (cf. Huntington 1996), the effects of which continue to shape the world’s political and religious landscape, particularly of Middle East.

The attack also brought to world-wide prominence the mode of ‘suicide-attacker’. However, 9/11 was by no means the first occasion such tactics had been used. Since Russian anarchists employed explosives at the beginning of the 20th century to kill both themselves and their targets, Japanese kamikaze pilots, the Tamil Tigers, the Kurdish Workers Party, the

¹ 17th September 2001. For footage, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TRVcnX8Vsw> [accessed 21/3/15]

Syrian Nationalist Party, Hezbollah, Palestinians and Chechens all deployed suicide missions to some effect against stronger enemies (Pape 2003; Gambetta 2005a). Therefore, although ‘suicide bombing’ is particularly associated with Islamist groups in the modern mind, it is worth noting that the majority of suicide missions have been carried out by secular groups (Gambetta 2005, 261). Nonetheless, the rhetoric used by modern ‘suicide-attackers’ to explain or justify their assaults have been couched specifically in terms of the Islamic martyr tradition.

For example, in June 2001, Ismail Masawabi, a well-educated Palestinian, killed himself and two Israeli soldiers in a suicide attack. From his ‘martyr-video’ it is clear he understands himself to stand in the long line of Muslim martyrs who die fighting for freedom and justice.

Thanks be to God who brings about the mujahedeens’ victory and the dictators’ defeat...Dear Muslim youth the world over: I greet you with the blessed greetings of Islam; greetings that I send to all of you who fight in the name of religion and the nation;...The wish to become a martyr dominates my life, my heart, my soul...We are a nation living in disgrace and under Jewish occupation. This happened to us because we didn’t fight them; we didn’t fight for God. (Quoted in Reuter 2004, 90–91)

Masawabi goes on to explain that inaction in the current crisis is not an option for the true Muslim, and that he prefers ‘to meet God and leave humankind behind’ before warning his audience that God will not forgive any who do not rise to the challenge and fight for Islam.

He then expresses the belief that his actions will take him to heaven:

My brothers and my family: I shall be in Paradise where everything will be mine. So don’t be sad that you’ve lost me. In Paradise I shall be immortal, so you should be glad that I’m there.

While Western politicians are often at pains to resist connections between ‘terrorism’ and Islam, that numerous posters, murals, songs, and internet sites (Bunt 2003) celebrate the actions of those who kill and die for God demonstrates that Masawabi’s narrative was

plausible enough to fuel the Palestinian martyr cult, which praises its *jihadi*-martyrs (Bloom 2005, 19–44).

Al-Qaeda employed a similar narrative after 9/11. Osama bin Laden set the conflict within the parameters of an apocalyptic Holy War, mirroring George W. Bush's Crusader-inspired 'clash of civilisation' ideology:

The world has been divided into two camps: one under the banner of the cross – as the head of the infidels, Bush, has said – and one under the banner of Islam...Adherents of Islam, this is your day to make Islam victorious. (Quoted Middleton 2006, 7).

It is within this potent apocalyptic context that Islamic notions of *jihad* and martyrdom meet. Yet, this is not a new development in Islamic martyrology.

Islamic martyr theology was essentially shaped by the early battles against the Meccans. Although ultimately victorious, Muslims endured military setbacks, and therefore had to account for those who died in conflict. The solution was to develop a conception of martyrdom where God would reward the fallen.

Do not think those who have been killed in the way of Allah are dead; they are rather living with their Lord, well provided for. Rejoicing in what their Lord has given them of his bounty, and they rejoice for those who stayed behind and did not join them, knowing that they have nothing to fear and that they shall not grieve. (Qu'ran 3:169–70)

It is important to note that the very earliest traditions made little distinction between the rewards for those killed in battle and those who died in other ways (Affsaruddin 2014; Cook 2007). However, by the mid-8th century, the battle-martyr interpretation was firmly established in exegetical tradition, along with the rewards such martyrs could expect.

The martyr has six distinctive features in the presence of God: God forgives his sins as soon as the first drop of his blood strikes the earth; he will enjoy the vestments of faith; he will marry a dark-eyed damsel; a door to Paradise will open for him; he will be spared the torments of the grave; and finally, he will be kept safe from the greatest fear, that of the Day of Resurrection.²

² Words attributed to the Prophet's Companion, recounted by Makhul (d. 731), quoted in Affsaruddin 2014, 48.

While the seeds of Islamic martyr theology are found in conflicts with outsiders, it was developed in the foundational Sunni-Shi'a intra-community dispute, and the decisive battle at Karbala, commemorated on the Day of Ashura.

Importantly, therefore, since Islamic martyr theology developed in the context of battle, the 'martyr-killer' is *not* an incongruent concept. Furthermore, while suicide is forbidden in Islam (Qu'ran 4:29), Hussein's inevitable death at Karbala provided the means by which commentators can incorporate 'suicide operations' into the sphere of martyrdom. A number of *fatwas* have declared that modern 'sacred explosions' are not suicides, but acts of sacrifice.³ So speaking *specifically* about Palestinian suicide bombing, Egyptian scholar, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, insisted:

It is not suicide, it is martyrdom in the name of God. Islamic theologians and jurists have debated the issue, referring to it as a form of *jihad* under the title of 'jeopardising the life of the *mujahed*

For al-Qaradawi and others, this form of attack, carried out for the right motives, is similar to 'plunging single-handed into the enemy with reasonable certainty of being killed.' Since this can be permitted, so too are those circumstances where the 'holy warrior's' death is certain in the attack.

The most extreme appropriation of classical martyr theology was found in the Iran-Iraq War (1980– 1988). After Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, invoking the spirit of Karbala, recruited hundreds of thousands of young men to charge the Iraqi front line in mass human suicidal waves, until either they overran the enemy or were mown down by Iraqi gunners. Banners bearing the slogan: 'Every land is Karbala...every day is Ashura' encouraged Shia Iranians to see themselves as heirs to Hussein's martyr-army, fighting against the errant Sunni Muslim. It is widely reported—though physical evidence is lacking—that volunteers were issued with keys to be worn round their necks which would

³ For example 'The Islamic Ruling on the Permissibility of Martyrdom Operations'. <http://www.religioscope.com/pdf/martyrdom.pdf> (accessed 22/3/15).

open the gates of Paradise on death. Khomeini declared, 'The tree of Islam can only grow if it's constantly fed with the blood of the martyrs' (see Reuter 1994, 33–51). Iranian soldiers were told their martyrdom would result in entry to Paradise.

These historical snapshots demonstrate widespread, though by no means universal, belief in the efficacy of martyrdom, which at least for some includes 'suicide missions'. Such actions are rooted in ancient Qur'anic exegetical traditions, in which martyrs constitute a category of 'special dead' who attract specific rewards, buy exemption from general judgement by bartering their own lives (Qur'an 4:74), effectively (whether the Iranian key story is true or not) unlocking paradise with their own blood. While Islamic martyr theology has attracted criticism, many of these martyr-tropes are anticipated in early Christianity, in which Christians could similarly win salvation by voluntarily shedding their own blood through martyrdom.

Martyrdom and Salvation in Early Christianity

In one of the earliest creedal statements preserved in the New Testament, St Paul writes:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins (ὕπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν) in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3).

For Paul, as for all New Testament authors, the death of Jesus was a decisive salvific event through which the sins of believers could be forgiven. While there is some variation in the New Testament over the precise mechanics of atonement (e.g. Hengel 1981; Frey and Schröter, 2005) the authors generally assent to Luke's affirmation that there is 'no other name under heaven by which people can be saved' (Acts 4.22), and that the shedding of Jesus' blood is the significant factor in effecting salvation. So for John, 'the blood of Jesus...cleanses us from all sin' (1 John 1:7), while the author to the Hebrews insists the singular nature of Christ's atoning sacrifice: Jesus is

a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the Heavens [who] has no need...to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered up himself. (Heb 7:26–27; cf. 9–10)

However, some early Christian texts trouble both the singularity and sufficiency of Christ's suffering and death.

In Colossians, both appear to be challenged, as Paul's suffering seems to contribute to the as yet incomplete work of salvation:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings (ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν) for your sake (ὕπὲρ ὑμῶν), and in my flesh I complete what is lacking (τὰ ὑστερήματα) in Christ's afflictions (θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ) for the sake of his body (ὕπὲρ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ), that is, the Church (Col. 1.24).

Whether or not the letter is by the hand of the apostle, Paul is presented as in some way making up for a perceived shortfall in Christ's suffering. Arthur Droge goes so far as to suggest Paul is here presented as 'a second Christ' (1988, 263).

A similar idea is found in 2 Cor 1:5–7, where Paul and his fellow-workers 'share abundantly in Christ's suffering' (τὰ παθήματα τοῦ Χριστοῦ), which is for the Church's 'comfort (παράκλησις) and salvation (σωτηρία)'. In 2 Corinthians, Paul also envisages that members of the church will share in the suffering of the apostles (1:7; see Lim 2009). Paul usually presents himself as an imitator of Christ, and urges his churches to imitate him in turn (1 Thess 1:6; 1 Cor 11:1; 2 Cor 1:6; Gal 4:12; cf. 2 Thess 3:7, 9). Moreover, Paul can even speak of himself being poured out as a sacrificial libation for the faith of his churches (Phil 2:17; cf. 2 Tim 4:6–7). As such, Paul's suffering is 'for' the church, and so even if the presence of any expiatory significance in Col. 1:24 is contested, it is clear that Paul's suffering performs a vicarious service.

However, Paul is not alone in this blurring of the distinction between Christ's suffering and that of the early Christians. As believers began to die for their faith, the martyrologies that followed modelled stories of the martyrs on the death of Jesus, and

adopted some of the theological claims about his death. This development is already underway in the book of Revelation.

Revelation

Martyrdom is a prominent feature of the Apocalypse.⁴ In fact, Revelation contains the earliest depiction of martyrs in a post-mortem state:

I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord...how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?’ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been (Rev 6:9–11).

The judgement theme that pervades the Apocalypse is here intimately connected with the experience of the martyrs. They call for vengeance on ‘the inhabitants of the earth’ (6:10), a *technicus terminus* for those who worship the Beast (13:3, 8, 16). Moreover, Revelation’s judgement is delayed until a certain number of martyrs are killed (6:11); martyrdom is a way in which Christians can hasten the End, by contributing to the number of those who must be killed before judgement takes place (Lee 1998; Middleton 2006, 158–71).⁵

Moreover, as well as bringing judgement forward, the martyrs—as in Islamic thought—buy themselves an exemption from the final judgement. Among the rewards reserved for the martyrs in Revelation is an exclusive early resurrection. Those ‘beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast’ come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years (20:4). Only after this are the rest of the dead raised for judgement, at which point they will be judged by what they have done (20:13–14). However, martyrs are exempted (20:6); their martyrdom saves them from judgement.

⁴ For discussion, see: van Henten 2012; Pattemore 2004 68–116.

⁵ Some interpret Col 1:24 as Paul’s contribution to the ‘Messianic woes’ that must be completed before the end comes (see Wilson 2005, 168–72).

As with many early Christian accounts of suffering, John links the martyr's experience with that of Christ's. In the Apocalypse, Jesus functions as the proto-martyr (Middleton 2015); he is described as the faithful witness/martyr (ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός),⁶ the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5). While many readers have read the death of Jesus in the Apocalypse as a model of non-violent acceptance of suffering (e.g. Bredin 2003; Blount 2006), his act of martyrdom also fully incorporates his vindication, resurrection, and elevation to the position of judge, who smites the nations with a rod of iron (19:15). Martyrs in Revelation 'follow the Lamb wherever he goes' (14:4), and this includes his martyrological pattern of death, resurrection, and glorification. (Middleton 2015, 232–36). The martyrs are also presented as faithful witnesses (e.g. Antipas is ὁ μάρτυς...ὁ πιστός in 2.13), they are redeemed from the dead (14.3), and sit on Christ's throne (3:22) to reign (20:6), and judge the nations (2:26). In other words, the martyrs do what Christ does. They 'wash their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (7:14), but also supplement Christ's blood with their own (16:6) in order to win salvation. In Colossians and Revelation, we witness the genesis of a soteriological problem within early Christianity. As Jesus' death became a paradigmatic model of discipleship, those who followed his path of suffering and martyrdom came themselves to function in some way as 'second Christs'.

Martyrs as Alter Christi

As Christians sought to interpret experiences of persecution and suffering, they turned to the model of Christ's passion. Through developing an understanding of themselves as constituting a 'suffering body' (Perkins, 1995), early Christians were able to transform experiences of suffering from hardships which had be endured (e.g. Gal 1:4; 2 Thess 3:1–2) into joyful opportunities to imitate Christ (e.g. Phil 2:5–11; Mt 5:11–12/Lk 6:22–23; Jas

⁶ See Middleton 2014 for discussion of the meaning of μάρτυς.

1:2). Suffering and martyrdom became the ultimate sign of commitment to Christ, so that in the letters of Ignatius, we witness a strong link between discipleship and martyrdom.⁷ Those who wish to be disciples, he writes, must imitate Jesus (*Rom* 6.3) and ‘voluntarily choose to die into his suffering’ (*Magn* 5.2). Ultimately, for Ignatius, it was only through martyrdom that one could finally *become* a disciple:

Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. Better yet, coax the wild beasts, so that they may become my tomb and leave nothing behind...Then I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will no longer see my body (*Rom* 4:1–2).⁸

This idea is not entirely new in early Christianity. The cross saying (Mark 8:34//Mat. 10:38//Lk 9:27; Q14:27), especially in its Markan version, indicates that taking up cross is a *precondition* rather than a consequence of following Jesus. ‘If anyone wishes to come after me, let him [first] deny himself, [next] take up his cross, and [only then] follow me’ (Mark 8:34).

Similarly, Hebrews holds up the suffering Jesus as a model to emulate:

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore, let us go forth to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured (Heb 13:12–13).

Both Mark and the author of Hebrews, therefore, create a pattern of discipleship modelled on the suffering and death of Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus one must suffer like Jesus. As if to illustrate the point, in the earliest recorded story of Christian martyrdom, Luke creates explicit parallels between Stephen’s stoning and Jesus’ crucifixion (see Pervo 2009, 168): Stephen is seized, tried by the Sanhedrin, false witnesses accuse him of blasphemy and threatening the temple. In death he commits his spirit to Jesus, cries aloud, and prays for his persecutors (Acts 6:8–7:60).

⁷ E.g. *Rom* 3.2; *Eph* 3.1; *Trall.* 5.2.

⁸ Translation Holmes, 2007.

The idea of martyrs modelling Jesus is developed in the second and third century martyr acts. Some narratives explicitly pattern the deaths of the martyrs on Jesus' Passion (Moss 2010, 45–75). In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, there are several clear points of connection (see Dehandschutter 1982, 660–61): Polycarp predicts his death; he is betrayed by one of his household; rides into the city on a donkey; pray for the church, hears a voice from heaven; and his body is pierced. Furthermore, the martyr is a 'sharer in Christ' (Χριστοῦ κοινωνός; 6.2) to the extent that Christ is the pilot (κυβερνήτης) of his body (19.2). As well as mirroring the death of Jesus in his own sufferings, the martyr enjoys a form of mystical union with Christ (cf. Gal. 2:20; Phil 2:13).⁹ As the identities of Christ and the martyrs became intertwined in Christian martyrologies, theological accounts of Christ's death began to bleed into theologies of martyrdom. In what follows, I highlight three areas where the martyrs take on significant theological aspects generally reserved for Christ's death: the defeat of Satan; sacrifice; and salvation.

Martyrdom as Overcoming Satan

In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as an exorcist; the 'strong man' who overcomes Satan (Mk 3:22). However, for other New Testament writers, the decisive means by which Jesus defeats Satan is his death (e.g. Jn 12:32–33; 1 Cor 2:8; Heb 2:14–15; 1 Jn 3:8). Christians are, as a result, able to overcome Satan through resistance (1 Peter 5:8–9), God's help (Rom 16:20), or importantly, as in the Apocalypse, through martyrdom (Rev 12:11).

Early Christian accounts of martyrdom set the martyr in the midst of a cosmic conflict (Middleton 2006), where the principal enemy is Satan rather than the Roman State. After one

⁹ Similar comparisons are made between the martyrs and Christ throughout early Christian martyrologies. For examples, see Middleton 2006, 82–84.

of her prison visions, Perpetua, who had been condemned to the beasts, realises ‘that it was not with wild animals I would fight, but against the Devil’ (10:14). In the *Martyrs of Lyons*, the persecution of the Christians is set in an apocalyptic context, where Satan marshals his troops against the church, ‘swooped down with full force’, and ‘training and preparing his minions’ for their battle ‘against God’s servants’ (1:4–5). Furthermore, sadistic jailors are said to be ‘aroused and filled with the Devil’ (1:27), while Ignatius also attributes ‘cruel tortures’ to the Devil’s doing (*Rom.* 5:3).¹⁰

Significantly, Satan’s goal is not to cause the death of the Christians, but to tempt them away from their confession of faith.

Those who were condemned to the beasts endured terrifying torments...The purpose was that, if possible, the tyrant might persuade them to deny the faith by constant torment. For many were the stratagems the Devil devised against them. But thanks be to God, he did not prevail against all of them (*Mart. Poly.* 2:4–3:1).

However, some in the church did deny under torture. In the *Martyrs of Lyons*, those who fell away are said to be ‘untrained, unprepared, and weak, unable to bear the strain of a great conflict’ and ‘stillborn’ (1:11). They were ‘ensnared by Satan’ (1:14) and ‘devoured by the Devil’ (1:25). By contrast, those who achieved martyrdom repressed (καταπιέζω) and overwhelmed (καταργῶν) Satan (1:23, 42). Perpetua also achieves this victory, trampling on the Devil’s head (*calcaui illi caput*; 4:7; 10:11; cf. *Rom* 16:20), through her martyrdom.

Similarly, Tertullian states:

The Christian is snatched by faith from the jaws of the devil, but by martyrdom he fells to the ground the enemy of his salvation. By faith the Christian is delivered from the devil, by martyrdom he merits the crown of perfect glory over him (*Scorpiace* 6).

For Tertullian, while faith is enough to save the Christian from Satan’s grasp, when the martyrs follow Christ’s example of suffering and death, they also share in his cosmic victory over the Devil.

¹⁰ See also *Mart. Justin* (recension C), 1:1.

Martyrdom as Sacrifice

Sacrifice is the second theological element of Christ's death attributed to martyrs (see Castelli 2004, 50–68; Moss 2010, 83–87). The sacrificial element of Christ's death is found throughout the New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor 5:7; Eph 5:2; Heb 9:14, 26), as both an offering to God, and for the people. As Christ became the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7), Polycarp is said to be a ram offered as a burnt offering to God:

So they did not nail him, but tied him instead...like a splendid ram chosen from a great flock for a sacrifice, a burnt offering prepared and acceptable to God (*Mart. Poly.* 14:1).

This image of Polycarp invokes the *Aqeda* (Gen. 22), which was itself an important lens for early Christian interpretation of the death of Jesus. As with Christ's death, Polycarp's martyrdom benefits the Christian community. His death 'put an end to the persecution, as though he were setting his seal upon it by his martyrdom' (1:1). Polycarp's death becomes in effect a death *for* others.

Similarly, Ignatius speaks of his impending martyrdom as a beneficial sacrifice to God (*Rom.* 2.2; 4.2). On several occasions he states or prays that his sacrifice might be a 'ransom' (ἀντίψυχον) for the faithful (*Poly.* 2:3; 6:1; *Smyr.* 10:2; *Eph* 21:1). Maturus and Sanctus are also described as sacrifices (*Mart. Lyons* 1:39), as the martyrs enact the notion of discipleship as sacrifice found in the New Testament (Rom 12:1; 1 Pt 2:5).

Behind much of this sacrificial imagery is the presentation of Jesus in Hebrews. In this letter, Jesus functions as both high priest and sacrifice. Origen exploits this idea in writing on the martyrs:

For just as those who served the altar according to the Law of Moses thought they were ministering forgiveness of sins to the people by the blood of goats and bulls, so also the souls of those who have been beheaded for their witness to Jesus do not serve the heavenly altar in vain and minister forgiveness of sins to those who pray.

At the same time we know also that just as the High Priest Jesus Christ offered himself as a sacrifice, so also the priests of whom he is High Priest offer themselves as a sacrifice. This is why they are seen near the altar as near their own place.

Moreover, blameless priests served the Godhead by offering blameless sacrifice...And who else is a blameless priest offering a blameless sacrifice than the person who holds fast his confession and fulfils every requirement the account of martyrdom demands? (Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 30)¹¹

Origen merges the image of Jesus as priest and victim in Hebrews with the presentation of the martyrs in Revelation as both at the altar, and priests of God. Furthermore, he explicitly links the function of Christ's death with the martyrs. As Christ died to save sins in the same way as the priests of the old covenant used the blood of goats and bulls to atone for the sins of the people, the martyrs also are able to minister forgiveness by means of their own blood. As the High Priest offered himself as a sacrifice, so also do the priests of the high priests. Christ's transaction in Hebrews works because he is a blameless priest offering a blameless offering. Similarly, martyrs, by virtue of their martyrdom, function in heaven like Christ as both blameless priests and the offering, and are thus able to forgive the sins of those who pray. Origen's theology of martyrdom clearly threatens the uniqueness of Christ's atoning sacrifice found in Hebrews.

Martyrdom and Salvation

Third, Origen's belief that the martyrs are not only sinless, but appear to be able to forgive the sins of others appears in other early Christian texts. We saw earlier that the Devil ensnared and devoured some of the Christian community in Lyons. However, successful martyrs snatch back some of those souls, so that 'the dead were restored to life through the living' (*Mart. Lyons* 1:45). Those who had previously denied saw examples of successful martyrdom and rushed back to the arena to retract their denial, and so were 'conceived and

¹¹ Translation Greer 1979

quickened again in the womb' (1:46). This is not quite the cosmic forgiveness of sin found in Origen, but it is the martyrs that provoke the repentance of the deniers, and who force Satan to 'disgorge alive all those whom he at first thought he had devoured' (2:6). However, martyrs and confessors, as those who model Christ most closely, were believed to possess the power to forgive sins and therefore grant salvation. Perpetua is able to alter the post-mortem fate of her brother from suffering to peace (*Pass. Perpetua* 7–8).

By the end of the second century a rudimentary martyr cult had developed (Brown 1980) as the status of martyrs become elevated. Relics were collected (cf. *Mart. Poly.* 17–18), and worship was held near their graves. Moreover, martyrs and confessors came to rival the authority of the developing episcopacy (Klawiter 1980). In Saturus' prison vision, Perpetua intervenes in a dispute between a bishop and a presbyter (*Pass. Perp.* 13:1–4), suggesting—at least in some Christian circles—that martyrs outranked the offices of bishop and presbyter.

This tension between the respective authority of martyr and bishop developed through the third and fourth centuries, especially in the aftermath of the persecutions of Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian when the church had to deal with the large numbers of the lapsed (see Middleton 2012). The lapsed turned to the confessors—those who modelled Christ most closely—to pardon their betrayal. Cyprian (*On the Lapsed*) and Tertullian complained about too easy restitution for the lapsed, with the latter restricting the power of the martyrs to 'purging their own sin' (*On modesty* 22). This is significant. In attempting to curb the power of the martyrs, the early Church Fathers theologically crystallise the popular idea that those who endure martyrdom effectively save themselves. So, Tertullian asks:

Who does not join us, and joining us, does not wish to suffer, that he may purchase for himself the whole grace of God, that he may win full pardon from God by paying his own blood for it (Tertullian, *Apology* 50)

Other writers, such as Origen express similar ideas, but the logic is devastatingly simple. The Book of Revelation depicts martyrs in heaven before the general resurrection, therefore martyrs must have a special status to be raised instantly. Martyrdom was considered to be a second baptism (e.g. *Pass. Perpetua* 21.2). Since baptism was the washing away of sins, martyrs were by definition sinless at the point of death, and so by baptising themselves in their own blood, attained salvation.

Conclusion

The martyr is a controversial figure, as likely to provoke fear and suspicion as admiration and respect. The term has always been contested in both Christianity and Islam (Middleton 2014), and the suicide bomber's martyrological status particularly so today. While attempts have been made to distinguish between 'true' and 'false' martyrdom in both traditions (Wicker 2006), other studies have argued that even these attempts constitute nothing more than a 'martyr-making' process; martyrdom simply becomes a death of which the narrator approves (Middleton 2014). Even the so-called 'lust for death' in contemporary suicide missions can be compared to the early Christian phenomenon of 'voluntary martyrdom' (Middleton 2006; 2013; cf. Moss 2012; Buck 2012), or even what Droge (1989; Droge and Tabor 1992, 113–28) takes to be Paul's suicidal musings whether to remain with the Philippians or go to the Lord, driven by the clear conviction 'to die is gain' (Phil 1:23).

Martyrs display extreme acts of devotion or commitment to their cause. For early Christians, martyrs most closely re-enacted the passion of Christ, and inspired devotional cultic activity. The cult of the martyrs grew into the more full-blooded Christian cult of the saints, including a concern for the collection of relics¹² that provided subsequent generations

¹² *Mart Poly* 17:3–18:3 may reflect an attempt to counter excessive cultic devotion to the martyrs. For discussion, see Hartog 2013, 320–24.

with a tangible link to both the martyr, and through him or her, Christ. Similar cultic remembrance is found in Islam through the commemoration of Karbala on the Day of Ashura, or the near cultic commemoration of modern Palestinian martyrs. Behind these celebrations is the conviction that martyrs comprise a category of ‘special dead.’

In both Christianity and Islam martyrs attain rewards for their devotion. The most significant of these appears to be an exclusive reward; exemption from the normal process of eschatological judgement. Jensen insists post-mortem reward is ‘a necessary part of any theology of martyrdom’ (Jensen 2010, 140). However, while post-mortem punishment seems to act as a deterrent to denial in early Christian martyrologies, there is little evidence reward is the *primary* motivation in either Christian or Islamic forms of martyrdom. Nonetheless, religious reflection on martyrdom led to an exalted status of the martyrs and the practice, so that Tertullian’s quip that the ‘sole key to unlock Paradise is your own life’s blood’ could have been written for many Islamic as well as Christian contexts. Even if the physical ‘key to paradise’ in the Iran-Iraq war should be doubted, the story resonates strongly with early Christian beliefs that martyrs can save themselves. Furthermore, in early Christianity, martyrdom constituted not only a rival locus of authority to Church leaders, it also blurred the uniqueness of Christ’s salvific death. In both Islam and Christianity, therefore, martyrdom becomes a potent alternative source of salvation.

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